

The Mystery of God's Will
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Jan. 6, 2013
Rev. John Cleghorn

Text: Ephesians 1:3-14

Family traditions sometimes spring from humorous origins. So it is with our family and a Christmas tradition that all started with a funny misunderstanding one Christmas a few years ago. No names will be mentioned, to protect the innocent. But it went like this.

On Christmas morning, a certain member of the family always likes to "play Santa Clause." She takes her post on the floor at the foot of the tree and hands the presents to their proper recipients.

This one Christmas, she was down to just the last few presents. Wrapping paper and ribbon littered the floor. Santa's helper reached to the back of the tree and pulled out a gift that was almost overlooked. She read the card. The gift was for her. But she couldn't quite make out the writing indicating who the gift was from.

"It's in cursive," she said, "It says "From: A-L-L-O-F-U-S."

A puzzled look took shape on her face.

"Who is 'Aloafus,'?" she asked.

That's when one of the others of us saw the opportunity to have a little fun at the expense of Santa's helper.

"Have we never told you about your Uncle Aloafus?" she said. "Well, he is quite a character. Maybe he will come visit you sometime. How nice of him to send you a gift this year."

So it went for a few minutes until Santa's helper figured out the card had actually read "From: All of us."

Ever since then, a gift from Uncle Aloafus has mysteriously appeared under the tree, and the legend of Uncle Aloafus lives on.

In a sense, we find ourselves in the same position this Sunday. Like Santa's Helper that morning, we are looking at a present of wondrous and mysterious origin, trying to make sense of it. We are all like the Magi, who visited the manger that first Christmas to wonder at the incarnation of the Lord in a newborn child. From that tradition, we call today Epiphany Sunday, which comes from the Greek, *epiphaneia*, which means "manifestation" or "striking appearance." Even two thousand years later, God's appearance in Christ Jesus is striking and wondrous, or at least it ought to be. God forbid that we take it for granted.

As with the Christmas gift from the mysterious Uncle Aloafus, we also have received something of somewhat unknown origins. It is our text from Ephesians.

Ephesians Chapter 1 is an eloquent even poetic tribute to God. When I say it is of unknown origin, I mean that we aren't positive about who wrote this epistle. Some claim Paul wrote it. Others aren't convinced, leaving open the possibility that Ephesians is a letter that is meant to be a tribute to Paul, a work that should be read as part of the Pauline tradition but not to be assumed that it is from Paul himself.

So, in a sense, what we have is a letter from an unknown relative. Still, it's obvious from the way it is written that this letter is from someone who knows us intimately and loves us deeply as followers of Christ. We might even think of it as a kind of holiday letter, like those long narratives we receive each Christmas from a friend or relative who summarizes the last 12 months in their lives. Only this holiday letter deals not just with the year past or the year ahead. It discloses God's plan for what it calls "the fullness of time." Let us, together, see what this letter has to say to us on this Epiphany Sunday. Feel free to open you pew Bibles to page 463 in the Old Testament if you want to unpack it with me.

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After a greeting, the author begins with the idea of adoption.

God, he claims, "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before God in love. God destined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ."

I don't know about you, but I would readily admit I can't really know what it is like to be adopted, at least by human parents. Some of you do, though.

So we might come at it another way. Victor Hugo's story, *Les Miserables*, is being introduced to millions this season in movie theaters. The story follows the adoption of an

orphaned little girl by the hero, Jean Valjean. After repenting and giving his life to God, he assures the little girl's dying mother that the girl will "live in his protection." As those who have seen the movie know, Valjean goes on to demonstrate selfless and sacrificial love for the girl until he dies, knowing then she is safe.

Surely this story provides only a taste of what it means to be adopted by our Lord, to live in God's protection, to be destined for God's grace. Ephesians tells us that grace is "freely bestowed" on us in the person of Jesus Christ.

But the author of this amazing love letter hardly stops there. The letter goes on to say that not only are we adopted by God, but the one who has adopted us is rich. Our parent has claimed us, chosen us to receive an inheritance. It's not an inheritance we can measure by earthly standards, no millions in the bank, no vast land holdings, no majority stake in a global corporation. Those things pale in comparison to what we are chosen to receive. Ephesians says that our heavenly parent is rich in grace that is lavished upon us.

"With all wisdom and insight, God has made known to us the mystery of the Divine will, according to God's good pleasure set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in heaven and on earth." (1:8b-10)

Do you hear that? Can we really take it in? "All things in heaven and on earth." That is our inheritance and it is of cosmic proportions. This has been our heavenly parent's plan all along, for the "fullness of time."

Whatever we are facing, in our relationships, in disease that attacks our bodies our minds or our spirits, whatever we are feeling, in our sorrow for ourselves or others, in broken and dysfunctional relationships, whatever concerns we harbor for our nation or our world, however immediate these or other troubles are ... what more healing words can we possibly hear than what we find today in the first chapter of Ephesians? What greater assurance can there be, what more astounding epiphany can we receive than to know that, in Christ, God has been – and is even now – working out a plan? This Ephesians claims, is the "mystery of God's will."

Yet, dear friends, there is one more important piece of news in this letter from our unknown relative. These promises – our adoption and our redemption – are guaranteed. They cannot be taken away. They are sealed in the presence, now and forever, of the Holy Spirit.

Before us is the table of the Lord's Supper, a seal of our communion with Christ and of our community in and with each other. At this table, we are:

“renewed and empowered by the memory of Christ's life, death, resurrection and promise to return; sustained by Christ's pledge of undying love and continuing presence; and sealed in God's covenant of grace.”¹

But what happens here is far more than remembrance, it is reconciliation with God and with others, through grace in the Holy Spirit. Yet, again, it is a mere foretaste of what is to come.

“Nourished by this hope, the church rises from this table and is sent by the power of the Holy Spirit to participate in God's mission in the world, to proclaim the gospel, to exercise compassion, to work for justice and peace until Christ's Kingdom shall come at last.”²

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So, what can we make of this letter from an unknown relative? It's a lot to take in, a lot to digest. Indeed, it's enough to spend our lifetime understanding. Its contents probably strike each of us in different ways this morning, depending on where we are on the spectrum of faith, from certainty to seeker.

For some, it underwrites the certainty of our faith. It strengthens our resolve and refuels our passion to praise our God in word and in deed, even risking all we have to do so. Those whom that describes may locate themselves with the great reformer Martin Luther, who took on the entire Catholic church for its indulgences, saying with absolute conviction his immortal words, “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.”

Others of us here today may not feel that depth of conviction. Some may come here seeking the truth as they can understand it, bringing questions and doubts, but, thanks be to God, coming and asking and searching nonetheless. They may identify with the contemporary Christian writer Frederick Buechner, who wrote:

“A Christian is one who points at Christ and says, “I can't prove a thing, but there is something about his eyes and his voice. There's something about the way Christ carries his head, his hands, the way he carries his cross – the way he carries me.”

¹ PCUSA Book of Order, W-2.4004

² W-2.4007

Wherever you may be along that spectrum from certainty to seeker, this table is set for you. This church exists for you and because of you. Its ministries are open to you. Its ministries need you.

So, this friends, is the message of this letter from our unknown but loving relative. It is the mystery of God's will, God's plan for the fullness of time. It is the sum of the Gospel so that we, who "set our hope on Christ might live for the praise of his glory (1:12)" doing so not in part but with the sum of our lives.

Amen.